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Critics question why Ontario's long-term care funding didn't come sooner

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Norwood Nursing Home in Toronto on Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2020.

MELISSA TAIT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ontario is pledging more than half a billion dollars to prepare long-term care homes for COVID-19 surges, an investment that comes months after the sector urged the government to act.

A day after Premier Doug Ford declared Ontario is experiencing a second wave of the coronavirus, he announced \$540-million for long-term care to improve measures for infection-prevention and control, hire more staff and buy personal protective equipment.

In the spring, the coronavirus tore through nursing homes in Ontario, killing more than 1,800 residents.

"We aren't sparing any expense," Mr. Ford said. "We were in a crisis when this first happened, and we've come a long way."

Mr. Ford also said visits to homes in communities with the highest spread of COVID-19 – such as Toronto, Peel region and Ottawa – will be restricted to staff, essential visitors and essential caregivers starting on Monday. Essential visitors are those coming in for end-of-life visits, for example, and a caregiver is someone chosen by the resident to help them.

As of Monday, 46 of the province's 626 long-term care homes had outbreaks of COVID-19, after the number of cases in the facilities tripled over the past three weeks.

Senior infectious-disease experts have been calling on the government since June to implement infection-prevention and control measures in the province's long-term care facilities. These include hiring specialized staff to be deployed to facilities and overseen by experts at a local hospital.

The timing of the government's response has raised concerns in the health care sector that the system remains vulnerable to outbreaks of COVID-19.

"[The new spending] feels just so late and so inadequate. It's very unfortunate," Andrew Morris, an infectious disease expert at the Sinai Health System and the University Health Network in Toronto, said in an interview.

Dr. Morris said the recent rise of COVID-19 cases in the community has serious implications for long-term care.

"Anything other than keeping community transmission low is bound to be fraught with failure rates, and especially amongst the health care workers there, who unwittingly will end up invariably bringing it in ... and expose residents," he said.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said the government has not done enough to attract and recruit staff members into long-term care, including personal support workers. "Doug Ford has left seniors living in long-term care vulnerable as his government scrambles to catch up to the second wave of COVID-19," she said.

Donna Duncan, chief executive officer of the Ontario Long Term Care Association, which represents mostly for-profit homes, welcomed the announcement, but said the sector faces a staffing crisis that requires recruiting "an army" of employees.

"Absolutely, we wish it had come sooner," Ms. Duncan said in an interview. "There's a lot of work to do to actually implement these measures and we don't have a lot of time."

Government funding for personal protective equipment and infection prevention and control is crucial to ensuring the safety of seniors and recruiting new staff, Ms. Duncan said.

Implementing the proper infection control protocols could take weeks, if not months, she said.

Lisa Levin, CEO of AdvantAge Ontario, which represents 200 municipally owned and not-for-profit nursing homes, welcomed the \$540-million earmarked for the sector. The government also this week announced \$52-million for health care staffing.

"We're really, really happy," Ms. Levin said in an interview. "It's definitely going to set the province on a course to do better for seniors this time around."

Long-term care homes remain vulnerable to outbreaks of COVID-19, medical experts say.

Ottawa Public Health asked the Ottawa Hospital earlier this month to temporarily take over management of two homes owned by Extendicare to get major outbreaks under control. In total, hospitals are managing four homes in the province.

At the for-profit chain operator's Laurier Manor, a 242-bed home in the suburb of Gloucester, 25 residents have died of the virus. At West End Villa, another 242-bed home in Ottawa, 15 residents have died of COVID-19 since an outbreak was declared on Aug. 30.

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